

People smuggling funds IS: Bishop

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ABSTRACT

Destroying the people-smuggling trade remains a "national security priority" for Australia because it is being used globally to fund terrorism, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has said. Ms Bishop said she...

FULL TEXT

Destroying the people-smuggling trade remains a "national security priority" for Australia because it is being used globally to fund terrorism, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has said.

Ms Bishop said she was told repeatedly during a recent visit to Europe that illicit money was flowing from people smuggling and other transnational criminal enterprises to terrorists including Islamic State.

Her comments came as the Abbott government faced criticism over the Prime Minister's blunt refusal to resettle any of the thousands of minority Rohingyas or Bangladeshis at the centre of a growing refugee crisis in south-east Asia.

Ms Bishop emphasised she was not suggesting that people-smuggling networks in the south-east Asian region or networks targeting Australia were directly funding terrorism.

But she said that during conversations with European officials "they were talking about the connections between terrorist organisations across the Middle East including Da'esh [an alternative name for the Islamic State] and the people-smuggling trades".

"Australia's been in this situation before and we believe that the effort must be to disrupt the people-smuggling trade," Ms Bishop said.

"These criminal networks are not only using money to keep the networks alive, they are also being used to fund terrorism. So a national security priority for us is to prevent the people-smuggling trade from proliferating."

Europe is facing its own asylum-seeker crisis with a flood of migrants taking boats primarily from strife-torn Libya - where militants including IS have a significant presence - across the Mediterranean Sea mostly to Italy.

By contrast people-smuggling networks in south-east Asia have no known connections to terrorism financing.

But the fact that Ms Bishop cited terrorism funding as a reason to smash people-smuggling networks globally reflects the fact that the Abbott government means to continue its hardline border protection policy, which aims to dismantle the networks by depriving them of a product to sell to desperate asylum seekers.

The tough stance comes despite calls - including from Indonesia - for Australia to participate in resettling Rohingyas from Myanmar and Bangladeshis, the latter of whom are believed to be economic migrants escaping grinding poverty.

Ms Bishop discussed the issue on Friday with senior Indonesian diplomat Hasan Kleib during a meeting in South Korea of the MIKTA countries: Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and Australia.

The United States has said it is willing to take in Rohingyas, regarded as among the world's most persecuted people, as part of an international effort.

The Rohingyas are refused citizenship in Myanmar and have been subject to persecution and pogroms, prompting thousands to flee.

Ms Bishop indicated on Thursday Myanmar's treatment of Rohingyas should be a focus for countries in the region. The same day, the foreign ministers of Indonesia and Malaysia arrived in the Myanmar capital Naypyidaw to discuss the issue.

Illustration

Caption: PHOTO: Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop. Photo: Lee Jin-man; ILLUSTRATION: John Shakespeare

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